

***The Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front***

Charles R. Gallagher (Harvard Univ. Press, 2021), 336 pages, photos, notes, index

***Reviewed by John D. Woodward, Jr.***

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Father Charles Gallagher, an associate professor of history at Boston College, has vividly brought to life a little known, largely shameful, and eminently intriguing episode of American history in his latest book, *The Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front*. Gallagher has done groundbreaking work for the field of intelligence studies with this effort. He is the first scholar to document thoroughly the leading role Nazi intelligence and, specifically, SS officer Dr. Herbert Scholz, played in organizing and supporting covert action in Boston. He also casts welcome light on British intelligence operations to counter Nazi efforts in the United States.

As is well documented, many Americans supported the isolationist movement prior to Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hitler's declaration of war against the United States, and the US entry into World War II. Much has been written about the America First Committee, whose founding members in 1940 included several members of Congress and Charles Lindbergh, the famed aviator. In the late 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest," drew tens of millions of weekly listeners to his broadcasts, which featured a strong isolationist message laced with anti-Semitism.

As part of this effort, Coughlin played an instrumental role in establishing the Christian Front in the United States in 1939. He drew inspiration from the work of Arnold Lunn, a British scholar and journalist who converted to Catholicism in the early 1930s. Lunn was appalled at the atrocities committed against Catholic clergy by the communist-supported Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War. Lunn believed that Christians around the world suffered as a result and that they should join forces to oppose communism.

Coughlin took Lunn's formulation and molded it into his Christian Front—a group opposed to communism with heavy overlays of anti-Semitism. In Coughlin's reshaping, "Judeo-Bolshevism" became the threat to Christianity and Jews became the enablers and implementers of communism. To the Christian Front, Nazi Germany had backed

the Catholics in Spain and thrown military support behind Generalissimo Franco, while the USSR supported "godless priest-killers." The Soviets were the enemy.

What Gallagher exposes with his keen scholarship is how Nazi Germany used the Christian Front to run a large, well-organized covert influence program in Boston to keep the United States from intervening on the side of the United Kingdom, especially critical from June 1940, when it stood alone against the Third Reich. Gallagher recounts how SS officer Herbert Scholz, working from the German consulate on Beacon Street, recruited and then provided resources and guidance to Francis Moran, the Irish-American leader of the Christian Front's Boston chapter.

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***Pushing on an Open Door***

The Christian Front found fervent support among many Irish-American Catholics in Boston, a city with pockets of anti-Semitism, racism, and enmity toward the UK government. In Moran, the Nazis found their ideal spy and agent of influence: skilled organizer, devout Catholic, and articulate public speaker who had been educated by German priests and spoke excellent German.

Gallagher reveals that, despite extensive surveillance of the Christian Front and the German consulate by law enforcement, including the FBI, army and navy intelligence units, and Boston police, US authorities never realized Moran was a Nazi agent, nor did they appreciate Scholz's true intelligence mission in Boston. In fact, they seemed to have bought the cover story that "Handsome Herbert" had gotten into trouble while at the German embassy in Washington, DC, and was embarrassingly reassigned to consular duties in Boston.

To the contrary, Scholz was a Nazi on a mission in Boston. In addition to recruiting Moran, Scholz also helped to rein in the anti-Nazi criticisms of Heinrich Bruning, the former German chancellor (1930–32) who was in exile at Harvard. And lest there be any doubt, Gallagher details Scholz's ardent Nazi beliefs. He was too

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young to join the German military during World War I, but as a teenager Scholz joined the Freikorps, a paramilitary group with political ideals aligned with the Nazis. He next joined the Hitler's thuggish Brownshirts and studied for his PhD with Werner Schingnitz, "the top Nazi at the University of Leipzig." Scholz then transferred to the SS as a headquarters aide, where his duties included assisting Deputy Fuhrer Rudolph Hess.

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### *MI6 Responds*

As Gallagher makes clear, British intelligence launched its own largely successfully covert action to counter the Christian Front in Boston, then regarded as one of the most anti-Semitic cities in the United States. The British provided extensive funding through a cutout to Frances Sweeney. Sweeney was a journalist and devout Irish-American Catholic who fought tirelessly against racism, fascism, and anti-Semitism in Boston, drawing the ire of Boston's Catholic leaders. She self-published the small newspaper *Boston City Reporter* and founded the Irish-American Defense Association, which doggedly campaigned against Moran's Christian Front.

In Gallagher's judgment, Sweeney was not witting of the British intelligence role in bankrolling her efforts. She thought the money came from Americans disgusted with the pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic nature of the Front, a very plausible cover story.

Who was the American cutout? Gallagher, a meticulous researcher, does not identify the person, as he has not yet been able to reach a clear and convincing conclusion. British MI6 records containing the cutout's identity evidently remain classified. But the list of possibilities is probably not long. At a minimum, it would have been someone thoroughly trusted by British intelligence and respected by Sweeney.

The next question is whether the US government was aware of or cooperating with the MI6 covert influence operation? Recall that before becoming President Franklin D. Roosevelt's coordinator of information in 1941, William "Wild Bill" Donovan had been FDR's emissary on sensitive trips to the UK and had met frequently with

William Stephenson, the MI6 chief in New York City known as "Intrepid."

Did British intelligence ask Donovan to provide a trusted cutout? According to Evan Thomas, who has chronicled the CIA's early years, Donovan and Stephenson became so close "they were known as Big Bill and Little Bill."<sup>a</sup> Donovan had no use for isolationists like Amb. Joseph Kennedy, whom he had helped oust from London. Moreover, Donovan strongly supported the Lend Lease Act, which the Christian Front adamantly opposed. Perhaps this mystery will be solved in Gallagher's next book.

As a result of Sweeney's prodding, in January 1942 Boston police raided the Christian Front offices, seized thousands of books and pamphlets, and threatened Moran with arrest for selling unpatriotic publications. This gesture allowed the police chief to claim the patriotic high ground, but Moran emerged unscathed from his police interrogations. Sweeney continued her efforts to combat anti-Semitism until her death on June 19, 1944, age 36, of rheumatic heart failure. When warned that her campaigning would put a strain on her heart, Sweeney had replied, "Well, then, I'll die fighting for what I believe, won't I?"<sup>b</sup>

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### *The War Years*

When FDR closed the German embassy and consulates in summer 1941, Herbert Scholz received a new assignment to the German legation in Hungary and then to northern Italy where he was at war's end.

Interrogated after the war by the US Army Counter Intelligence Corps in Italy, and later by a US Justice Department official in Germany, Scholz stuck to his cover story that he was a diplomat with a bad heart, who only joined the Nazi Party to keep his job. US counterintelligence experts accepted that story, and, in Gallagher's telling, Scholz even outfoxed a young Captain James Jesus Angleton, who went on to become the CIA's counterintelligence chief. Like many former Nazis, Scholz ventured to South America for a period but returned to West Germany, where he applied for and received a German diplomatic pension in 1958.

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a. Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men* (Simon & Schuster, 1995). See also Michael Thompson, "Thoughts Provoked by *The Very Best Men*," *Studies in Intelligence: Annual Unclassified Edition* 39, no. 5, 1996, 25–34.

b. Isabel Currier, "Frances Sweeney," *The Commonweal*, 427–9, August 18, 1944.

Although the Christian Front continued to spread anti-Semitic propaganda and stoke violent attacks on Boston Jews during the war, it gradually lost momentum. Francis Moran joined the US Army and after the war worked as a reference librarian in Boston.

It is a bromide, but sometimes fact truly is stranger than fiction, especially where espionage is concerned. Charles Gallagher's *Nazis of Copley Square* is a unique and engaging contribution to intelligence studies.



*The reviewer:* John D. Woodward Jr., a former CIA and Defense Department official, is a Professor of the Practice of International Relations at the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University.

